

Louisiana Department of Education and Louisiana Board of Regents

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: Oct. 15, 2002

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PILOT PROGRAM TO AID 17 LOW-INCOME LOUISIANA MIDDLE SCHOOLS

BATON ROUGE, La. - Seventeen middle schools in seven Louisiana school districts - including about 2,200 students - will directly benefit from a \$12.5 million grant designed to close the achievement gap among Louisiana students. The schools will serve as a pilot aimed at creating a laboratory to find ways to improve student achievement among low-income students during the crucial pre-high school years.

The Board of Regents, in conjunction with the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and LaSIP, received notice recently that the state has been chosen to take part in the five-year, \$12.5 million GEAR UP program. The U.S. Department of Education is funding the grant.

During a news conference Tuesday, Commissioner of Higher Education E. Joseph Savoie and State Superintendent of Education Cecil J. Picard said they believe GEAR UP will improve how low-income students succeed in high school and in college and will consequently make them more competitive with middle-and-high-income students.

“We’re looking for a laboratory to see what works and doesn’t work as part of an effort to make sure the middle school years aren’t lost years,” Picard said. “Test scores show there is a dip in student achievement after elementary school. Something happens after the 4th grade. These are different kids than they were in elementary school and they need a different approach.”

“This targeted approach is an appropriate way to ensure that our low-income middle school students are on track academically and headed toward a productive postsecondary educational experience. I am proud that Louisiana has won this competitive grant because these funds will directly impact thousands of students,” Savoie said.

“My administration, working with the Blue Ribbon Commission, has made education and closing the achievement gap among students a top priority. The middle school years are critical in the development of our children; and this grant, along with our efforts in school accountability, will help students gear up and reach their achievement potential.”

School districts and schools participating in LA GEAR UP will include, but not necessarily be limited to :

- Avoyelles Parish (Bunkie, Mansura and Marksville middle schools);

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- East Carroll Parish (Lake Providence Jr. High);
- East Feliciana Parish (Clinton Middle School and Jackson Middle School);
- Orleans Parish (Sophie B. Wright and O. Perry Walker middle schools, and L.B. Landry Junior/Senior High);
- Pointe Coupee Parish (Livonia and Pointe Coupee Central High Schools);
- Sabine Parish (Zwolle Intermediate and Many Junior High); and
- Washington Parish (Angie, Franklinton and Thomas Junior High School).

To participate, school districts had to meet four criteria, which collectively reveal a need for dramatic intervention: 59 percent or more of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch; the district's composite ACT score is 19.6 or below; the percentage of first-time college freshmen is 42.7 percent or below, and the percentage of college freshmen requiring remedial courses is 45.6 percent. Schools were then selected based on their commitment to participate fully and their level of need.

Beginning with the 17 pilot schools in seven targeted districts, LA GEAR UP will provide comprehensive professional development for grades 7-12 as well as K-6 students. The targeted cohort will be this year's 7th graders, who will participate in the program through high school graduation and receive counseling and mentoring in college. More than 14,000 students will directly participate in the program over the five-year life of the grant.

LA GEAR UP takes a 'whole school' approach to impact student achievement. As a result, the program will target mathematics, science, and English language arts. The program also includes a guidance counselor initiative, a strong parental involvement component and a reward program designed to reinforce the reform efforts.

Dr. Kerry Davidosn, LaSIP/Project Director, emphasized that LA GEAR UP's "whole school" approach applies throughout the PK-12 spectrum.

"The goal is comprehensive and integrated state and local planning which leads to the blending and leveraging funds in support of key reform initiatives at targeted schools," he said.

To measure the program's impact, annual evaluations will be conducted measuring attitudinal and behavioral changes as well as test score results.

Staff have begun collecting baseline data and designing school specific GEAR UP intervention plans. A team of state GEAR UP directors is expected to visit Louisiana next month to review Louisiana's implementation plan. GEAR UP is scheduled to begin in participating schools by the first of the year.